



# The Difficulties of Teaching a " Man-Made Language"

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Nicole Décuré

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## The Difficulties of Teaching a “Man-Made Language”<sup>1</sup>

French being such a gender-laden language, it is something of a relief to teach a far more neutral language. Wonderful **it**! Why didn’t the French think of it? Marvellous **they**, **them** and **their**!!

Beautiful **people** who are neither masculine, as *les gens*, or feminine, as *les personnes*. Just plain, ordinary people.

English, like all languages, is a reflection of a culture and therefore sexist: a spinster is not the female equivalent of a bachelor, as Dale Spender points out, no more than old master parallels old mistress (Spender 17-18). In the same way, in French, *femelle* is derogatory when *mâle* is not. But this is the meaning of the words. French operates at this level, of course, but also at the more basic level of form: some words are masculine and some are feminine and the gender attributed to a word gives it another dimension. Problems arise when some words accept both gender.

English speakers do not stumble on the sex of each molecule. They do not have to wonder why on earth (feminine) and how the devil (masculine) a secretary ceases to belong to a boss and therefore ceases being a woman when she belongs to the state, as she then becomes *Madame le Secrétaire d’État*. An English speaker does not feel the adrenaline rushing through her veins when, after addressing her child’s headmistress as *Madame la Directrice*, she gives the same title to the female head of a research laboratory and only meets with a horrified frown from said head who wants to be taken seriously and could you please call her *Madame le Directeur*?

Our Canadian sisters have taken liberties with the French language that make me rejoice... with 0.01% of the population. Tagging took fifteen years to cross the Atlantic. Ridding the French language of its most archaic forms of sexism is likely to take at least fifteen times longer. I’ve had to eradicate *e*’s I had added, French-Canadian-like, to some words in order to get articles published in France. Readers found it “aggressive” and “childish”, whereas a Canadian journal like *Recherches Féministes* will only accept such

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<sup>1</sup>*Man-Made Language* is the title of a book by Dale Spender (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

words as *auteur* (writer) with an *e* at the end when applied to a woman.

But even though the dangers of sexual stereotyping are limited in English as compared to French, there remain a few difficulties that a feminist EFL teacher (teacher of English as a Foreign Language) has to face.

Although female students are about 50% of the whole student population at my university (science and medicine), more in the first years, less in the last, as could be expected, of course languages seem to attract the female students more than the males and my classes usually have a majority of young women. As can be expected too, the higher the level of the group, the higher the percentage of women. Now, although a large majority of their teachers through their twelve years or more of infant school, primary school and secondary school have been women, although they were born at about the same time as the women’s liberation movement, when faced with a simple exercise like adding a question-tag to the end of a sentence, if I leave them to their own devices, 90% of the time, the students (male and female) will write:

*The doctor is coming, isn’t he?*

or

*My English teacher didn’t call me, did he?*

thus pretending that the women students have no future as doctors (a masculine noun) or that I, the teacher (a masculine noun), don’t exist (or have undergone a sudden sex change).

So, when this occurs in their first written paper, I correct the personal pronoun into *s/he* in red and I underline it, twice. A lot of work (and ink) but well worth it because there will always be at least one student to complain indignantly about my correction and then I can explain why I did it. And I seize this opportunity to tell them that I give additional marks (although I do not really do it and they know it is only a joke) for a feminine instead of a masculine or, better still, for both genders. This, contrary to a lot of other recommendations I may make, does not go unheeded. The next time, *she*, *her*, *hers* appear in large numbers.

Also, at the very beginning of the first lesson, when I explain administrative procedures in French, I try to shock them into awareness by talking in the feminine. This never fails to stir them up. Sure enough, when I ask them for the number of their *carte d’étudiante*, the men object. “Hey, we’re here”, they say, or, more patiently (men are born teachers), “You can’t say that, it’s not correct.” To think they cannot even put capital letters where needed, not even in their own names. So I explain that in my classroom the masculine does not prevail upon the feminine and that we, the women, exist too and it is good for their souls (the men’s) to

experience how it feels to be a woman and ignored in language, and that I fail to hear them protest when the exclusive masculine is used. The female students never object to this. I can usually detect a glimmer of satisfaction in their eyes and they tend to look a little smug. But the rewards are certain. When the time comes for imaginative writing, I get quite a few heroines along with the heroes.

Another way of creating this awareness is dictating a few stereotypes, leaving the subjects out that they have to fill in as they go along, as in

*XXX stayed at home to look after the baby.*

*YYY was arrested and sent to prison.*

Almost all the subjects in the first sentence will be feminine, and masculine in the second, all the more so as the purpose of the exercise is not ostensibly role-stereotyping but just plain listening comprehension and spelling. So prejudices can wreak havoc.

One of the nice things about teaching a foreign language is that you have to talk and you can talk about almost anything. Women, feminism, sexism can be nicely integrated into a lesson via a written or oral text. But they are touchy subjects and it is difficult to foresee the reactions these topics will generate. In my more militant days, I used to barge in headlong with a text on the politics of housework or the right to abortion and try to launch a consciousness-raising session. Sometimes it worked. At the beginning of the 1970's I had a modicum of “success” with violent reactions, from the male students mostly but not only, such as “All women are corrupt, anyway” (it took a lot of explaining, in English, on the part of that bold student to get away with it, I would not leave him alone after he had blurted this out) or, “Abortion is criminal” from the more “enlightened” male judges of the (future) medical profession. Sometimes, people became personally involved. A couple rowed in public over the housework. The wife, for the first time in her life, felt she had enough support in the group to tell her husband to his face what she thought of his attitude. We stopped short of divorce. But, more often than not, the discussion (which was the aim of the debate to start with) fell flat. And at the end of the decade, people would not discuss these issues any longer. Perhaps they were too young to feel really concerned and this was no longer a fashionable subject. They felt they had heard it all before and were bored with it. Now, another decade has passed and this generation take many things for granted: the right to contraception, to abortion, equal pay for equal work, sharing the housework (theoretically at least, in practice, as one elder student pointed out recently, although they start out on an equal footing, they tend to fall back rather quickly on traditional role-playing). But some fundamental issues are still fairly

untouched, mainly women’s role in the family and the importance of marriage and motherhood. Now, I refrain from tackling these issues, except peripherally through the choice of texts or pictures.

Two years ago, I decided that I was being too shy and shirking the problem. So I went ahead and produced a split-graffiti exercise. I selected graffiti, feminist and other, from a book a thoughtful friend had given me for my birthday, split them and jumbled the endings. The aim of the exercise was to reconstruct them.

I did the exercise with a group with whom I got on well. We had a good atmosphere in the class and it was the last lesson of the year, a sunny Spring day. After about ten minutes, as the slogans were unravelled one after the other (*e.g. A woman who strives to be like a man lacks ambition*, or my all-time favourite, a godsend for a language teacher: *It starts when you sink in his arms and ends up with your arms in his sink*) I could see the women were having a good time, writing down some of them for future use on their boyfriends, while the men were becoming more and more hostile, even vocally violent, losing all sense of humour and, in fact, unable to unscramble any graffiti except the blandest and most obvious ones. We did not part the best of friends.

The next year, I had another nice group with nice male students who had a fairly good command of English. So I told them what had happened the year before, that there was no need to get upset as we were suffering from all sorts of sexist jokes all the time and these were fairly mild, just a few home-truths (I did not bend backward as far as to tell them that we loved them all the same). And I made them a cup of tea while they were doing the exercise. Well, they could not react badly if they did not want to look like bad sports, but I could feel the tension rising in one or two of them. Still, that way, I avoided making a few more enemies. I have seen them since. They came over, smiled and we had a chat. But what hard work! What precautions I had to take. I wish as many precautions were taken by people before they told sexist (anti-women) jokes.

I would like to hear about how other women teachers, especially language teachers, cope with this problem of sexism both in language and content. I am sure we could write a book on the subject.

Why don’t we?

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